

# To the victor the spoils: the cunning of Themistocles

Ralph Anderson

The aftermath of the Persian Wars presented many opportunities for spinning politicians to rewrite history. One of the most sophisticated was the Athenian Themistocles, an expert in presenting himself as the architect of Greek success and his enemies as Persian collaborators. Unfortunately, these tactics ultimately rebounded onto him.

When the Persian invasion led by the Great King Xerxes was repulsed in 479 B.C., those Greeks who had been lucky enough to have chosen the winning side found themselves in a strong position. As the immediate Persian threat receded, Greek state and individuals alike began to exploit their own contributions to the Greek war-effort and allegations about rivals' collaboration with the Persians in their continual struggles for pre-eminence. Prominent among the individuals who sought to maximize the gains from their own contributions to the war and to employ accusations of collusion ('medism', or siding with the 'Medes') to discredit their rivals was Themistocles of Athens, the architect both of the Greek victory at Salamis and, in the longer term, of fifth-century Athenian naval power. His extraordinary career well illustrates the amoral pragmatism with which the legacy of the Persian Wars was exploited – and also the extent to which the history of the Persian Wars was continuously rewritten for political advantage.

## Who owns the truth?

One example of this tendency to rewrite history with hindsight can be seen in the differing accounts of one of the earliest significant political actions attributed to Themistocles, the expansion of the Athenian fleet in 483 B.C. The Athenians had struck lucky with silver from the mines at Laurium, and were debating what to do with it. Themistocles is credited with persuading the Athenians to spend the money on increasing their fleet of triremes to 200 rather than simply dividing it up amongst themselves. Herodotus states that Themistocles intended the ships to be used in an ongoing war against the nearby island-state of Aegina, but adds that the expanded Athenian fleet tipped the balance in the war against Persia and thus saved Greece.

But Herodotus' is not the only version. Thucydides reports that Themistocles persuaded his fellow-citizens 'when Athens was at war with Aegina and when the foreign invasion was expected' – in other words, the primary target was Aegina, as in Herodotus, but the threat from Persia was not overlooked. By contrast, Plutarch's much later account (written in the first or second century A.D.) has Themistocles anticipating a second Persian invasion and seeking to expand the Athenian fleet to meet it, using the war with Aegina as a pretext because the Persian threat was too distant for the average Athenian to appreciate it. Given that in the year of the debate, Xerxes ordered work to begin on a ship-canal through the Athos peninsula in northern Greece in order to facili-

tate the movement of his war-fleet, it must have been clear that another invasion was being prepared. Nevertheless, in Plutarch's account, only Themistocles had the wit to realize that the Persians posed a renewed threat and the cunning to motivate his short-sighted fellow-citizens to prepare to meet it. It looks as if the further we get from the events, and the more entrenched Themistocles' heroic stature becomes in the historical tradition, the more penetrating – and the more exceptional – his foresight is taken to be.

## Slicing off Salamis

The same foresight and willingness to deceive other Greeks (albeit for their own good) is evident in accounts of Themistocles' finest hour, the battle of Salamis in 480. Following their victory at Thermopylae, the Persians occupied Greece as far south as the Isthmus of Corinth, including Athens, which was sacked. The combined Greek fleet gathered in the straits between Salamis and the mainland to plan its next move. The Peloponnesian majority favoured withdrawing and facing the Persian fleet at the Isthmus, still in Greek hands, where refuge could be sought on land if the battle went badly. Themistocles, realizing that if the fleet left Salamis it would break up and be vulnerable to being picked off piecemeal and that the narrow straits behind Salamis would neutralize the Persians' numerical advantage and thus favour the Greeks, persuaded them (Herodotus tells us) to stay put. When the Greeks' resolve weakened, he forced the issue by sending a message to the Persians, feigning covert Persian sympathies and claiming that the Greeks were divided and planning to flee and that, if they could be confined, they would easily be overwhelmed. The Persians were duly lured into battle in disadvantageous conditions and, as Themistocles had intended, were routed by the united Greek fleet in the narrow waters.

Themistocles was more than happy to accept the credit for the Greek victory. However, universal acclamation did not come so easily. Denied the first prize for valour in the post-battle ballot (each of the commanders thought he deserved it himself), he went to Sparta in the hope of receiving better honours there – which he duly did. Others, however, either at the time or later, seem to have tried either to deny Themistocles his glory or to claim a share of it for themselves. Herodotus credits the initial impulse to fight at Salamis to one Mnesiphilus – an interpretation later condemned by Plutarch as merely a spiteful attempt on Herodotus' part to diminish Themistocles' achievement. However, Plutarch also reports that a youthful Cimon – supposedly the bitter rival of Themistocles – not only supported Themistocles' plan to evacuate Attica and face the Persians at sea, but also distinguished himself brilliantly at Salamis. Was there, then, after the battle *of* Salamis, a battle *for* Salamis? That is to say, for a share of the glory?

## Are you with us or against us?

This rivalrous tendency to exploit the kudos of the Persian Wars was mirrored by an equal trend towards using allegations of

medism, collusion with the enemy, to eliminate political rivals. In inter-war Athens, a string of ostracisms (temporary banishments) and attempted ostracisms seem to have turned on the victims' (supposed) attitudes towards Persia. Aristides 'the Just', ostracized in 483/2, was dubbed a 'friend of Datis', the Persian commander in the First Persian War, on one *ostrakon*, despite having fought at Marathon and having supported Miltiades' successful plan of attack there. Members of the influential and aristocratic Alcmaeonid clan of Athens also seem to have become targets for ostracism following accusations that they had colluded with the Persians in 490. After Marathon, accusations of medism quickly became just another tool in Athenian internal politics, and the beneficiaries were those – such as Themistocles – whose hawkish policies regarding Persia commanded popular support. That many of these accusations were politically motivated and did not reflect genuine (or demonstrable) Persian sympathies was perhaps recognised by the Athenians themselves, who were perfectly happy to recall the supposed medizing traitors to help face Xerxes' invasion.

The Persian Wars were exploited in similarly pragmatic fashion in inter-state relations. No sooner had the wreckage of Salamis washed ashore than the Athenians tried to claim (according to Herodotus) that the Corinthian contingent had fled as soon as the fighting began. Sparta, meanwhile, proposed that the cities that had not helped fight the Persians be expelled from the Amphictyonic Council that administered the affairs of the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi. This would have left only 31 states on the Council, most of them small and easily coerced by Sparta, in effect placing the highly-influential oracle under Spartan control – as Themistocles pointed out, abandoning his earlier anti-Persian rhetoric in the face of a more pragmatic concern. This about-turn on Themistocles' part suggests just how pragmatic and how motivated by immediate political concerns the exploitation of the legacy of the Persian Wars could be.

However, Themistocles' star soon waned. His attempts to extort money from medizing states using the threat of the combined Greek fleet alienated many Greeks and was probably a factor in his exclusion from the establishment of the 'Delian League' (the naval defence force against Persia) by, among others, his Athenian rivals Cimon and Aristides. Moreover, Athenian politics was intolerant of individuals who attained such levels of personal prominence, and Themistocles himself was ostracized by 470. In the end, it was Themistocles' opposition to Sparta that brought about his downfall. Having alienated the Spartans both by opposing their bid for control of

Delphi and by the deception which allowed the walls of Athens (pulled down by the Persians) to be rebuilt against Spartan wishes, he compounded his crimes during his exile in Argos by intriguing with those in the Peloponnese who resented Spartan dominance.

At the time, the Spartans were engaged in disposing of their troublesome regent, Pausanias, whose high-handed and tyrannical behaviour had led to his removal as overall commander of the Greek alliance against Persia, and who had subsequently gone on to manifest disturbingly Persian attitudes and sympathies – and, so it was alleged, to conspire with the helots, Sparta's down-trodden population of servile labourers. The Spartans, at last accumulating enough evidence to condemn Pausanias, saw an opportunity to discredit Themistocles into the bargain. Themistocles, it was alleged, had known about Pausanias' plans but had failed to disclose them. This was enough to depict the very man whom the Spartans had honoured for his performance at Salamis as a medizer. Charges were duly brought at Athens and Themistocles was condemned to death in his absence. Forced to flee for his life, Themistocles sought refuge beyond the reach of either Athens or Sparta. His only recourse was to seek shelter at the court of the Great King. Ironically for a man who had based so much of his political career on opposing Persia, he ended his days as pro-Persian governor of Magnesia in Asia Minor. The double irony is that he should have been brought down by the very allegations of collusion with Persia that he had so often used to destroy his own rivals.

*Ralph Anderson teaches at the University of St Andrews.*